

Christian Dior
Cynthia Cooper, McCord Museum, Montreal
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Summary by Jenny Binet

Many of us today know and love Christian Dior's designs. University of Rhode Island TMD alumna, Cynthia Cooper, who works at the McCord Museum in Montreal, Canada, spoke to us about their Dior exhibition. With the benefit of a virtual tour, we were able to view many of Dior's most famous styles. Dior opened in 1947, after World War II. Christian Dior was big right away, unlike many other couture brands that evolved over time. Because of its immense success from the beginning, Dior has archives in Paris, France containing sketches of every design. Over ten years, Christian Dior created 22 collections featuring two a year. Every collection, line, and dress had a name. The exhibit is broken down into day, cocktail, and evening wear.

The exhibit begins with his most famous ensemble: The New Look. The New Look was "new" because it layered fabrics unlike wartime fashion, where rationing was implemented. Cynthia walked us through giving explicit details of magnificent dresses with soft shoulders, nipped-in waists, and mid-calf hems. These styles continued throughout Dior's career. Another popular feature of the New Look was the padded hipline, which gave the impression of a smaller waist. Every dress was either worked on by the traditional Atelier Flou or Atelier Tailleur, depending if the fabric was light like satin or heavy like wool. In the "Jour Daytime" exhibition room, we see New Look suits and the A-line silhouette. One of the McCord Museum's own suits from a spring collection featured what looks like contrasting patterns, but is layered silk organza, along with padded hips. This suit belonged to a woman in her 20's. Considering how our styles have evolved, this shows the contrast between generations for daytime attire.

Next, we saw the "Late Afternoon and Evening" room, or the cocktail dresses. In the cocktail dresses we see the craftsmanship and construction of Christian Dior, as he used details like sequins and ribbon. He created such a demand for these detailed products, thus reviving their industries. One of the dresses featured six different widths of ribbon. We learned that dresses with full skirts and fitted bodices were able to become something completely different when paired with a matching jacket. An important observation Cynthia noted was that people needed help getting dressed, which was different from the war time when everything was made to be easy and efficient. In this collection shirtwaist dresses were popular. One had a pleated overskirt with a slit, and an under skirt for sitting without crushing the tight pleats. There is no high-end luxury without black dresses, one of which had interchangeable bodices.

"Head to Toe Christian Dior," presented us with the smaller items that Dior made so that everyone could afford something from Dior. Dior worked hand in hand with many companies, creating partnerships for shoes, handbags, and other accessories. His perfumes mirrored his hourglass dress silhouettes and used his signature hounds-tooth patterns on the bottles. These items were sold in the boutique in the couture house.

Finally, walking virtually into the "Evening Dress" room we met the Isabelle dress weighing a total of eight pounds. The evening dresses featured red and pink, and low necklines featured in the Fall '47 collection. The beading and intricate details we saw were unlike anything. The Palmira dress has 65 different types of beads and sequins embroidered into it, an example of one of Dior's most luxurious pieces. The museum has a store copy of the dress "Venus" as well, which is made of gorgeous pink layers and beaded details.

By the time Dior had passed away he made up a total of 5% of France's exports. His legacy remains today as many of his silhouettes influence new designs. Cynthia Cooper was able to share her extensive knowledge on Christian Dior inspiring us with Dior's history and his influence on our own time.